

# The Critical Pragmatist as Scholar–Practitioner

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## Abstract

The intention of this article is to firmly build a case for the fit of a “new scholarship” known as scholar–practitioner as a leadership perspective grounded by the philosophical and theoretical tenets of critical pragmatism. Using post-formal thought as an approach to establish the fit of scholar–practitioner as a reform initiative and leadership preparation practice, etymology, pattern, process, and contextualization frame the discussion. Examination and deconstruction of modern and postmodern perspectives by way of post-formal thinking establishes space and readiness for the critical pragmatist as scholar–practitioner. Moreover, a pattern of interconnected relationships placing critical pragmatism in the center establishes the need for scholar–practitioner leadership. Accenting the strengths and uncovering the weaknesses of modernistic and postmodernistic approaches supports the scholar–practitioner’s integration of practical knowledge and scholarly knowledge into leadership praxis.

An emerging contender in the pursuit for effective educational reform is an approach that seeks to take the better of two competing approaches, keeping intact the structural components of modernity and the criticality approach of postmodernity. For critical pragmatists to address the fit of dependence on practical knowledge in modernistic approaches and the reliance on theoretical knowledge of postmodernistic approaches, the focus of educational reform is directed at educational leader preparation. “These efforts recognize that to create educational organizations different from what we have requires new ways

of thinking and acting. In this regard, development of new theoretical perspectives is central to developing effective practice" (Johnston, 1994, p. 117). While critical pragmatism is not an entirely new theoretical perspective, founded by John Dewey in the early 1900s, it is gaining currency as an alternative to traditional schooling with an emphasis on reconceptualizing the role of educational leaders as "transformative intellectuals" (Foster, 1994; Jenlink, 2001). Furthermore, Jenlink (2001) identifies this reconceptualized or "transformative intellectual" as one who facilitates the interplay of practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge. He maintains that "scholar-practitioner leadership, as a construct, represents a complex set of relationships between inquiry, knowledge, practice, and theory" (p. 6). Moreover, "shaping the conceptual and practical meaning of scholar-practitioner leadership is a dimension of criticality that transforms leadership practice into a leadership praxis," which is translated into effective leadership preparation and thus, educational reform (p. 6).

The critical pragmatic response to the debate over how to do schooling from organizational restructuring to leader preparation reveals a "new scholarship" that serves to overlap practice and theory (Jenlink, 2001, p. 7). Through the lens of post-formalism, the origins, nature, and limitations of modernism (i.e., practice) and postmodernism (i.e., high theory) within the context of educational leadership and reform reveals the etymology of a "new scholarship" called the scholar-practitioner. This paper will utilize Kincheloe and Steinberg's (1999) framework for post-formal criticality to uncover the etymology, pattern, process, and context of the critical pragmatist as scholar-practitioner and trace the movement toward more democratic approaches while realizing a web of possibilities for improving education.

## Etymology

According to Kincheloe and Steinberg (1999), critical pragmatists, as post-formal thinkers, begin to build meaning of their leadership approach through an understanding of the "historicity of its formation" or etymology (p. 62). From a historical vantage point, patterns, process, and context take form; in this case, the philosophical foundation of the theoretical concept of scholar-practitioner leadership. Historically, modern and postmodern schools of thought represent two opposing forces of educational reform initiatives that set the stage for the emergence of critical pragmatism in contemporary times. To frame the pragmatic fit, Ryan (1998) explains that some reforms address educational issues as a function of positional authority and efficiency, while others address issues of social justice, social equity, and democratic practices. The leader who strictly complies with the demands of the job relies heavily on practice, and acts as a manager under the influence of modernistic perspectives. Starratt (2001) identifies the rewriter of traditional schooling as one who practices under the tenets of postmodern theory, relying heavily on knowledge, criticality, and theory. The

middle-ground educational leader, the scholar-practitioner, “seeks to blur boundaries in this knowledge-practice and inquiry-practice relationship,” adding an element of criticality to practice; this leader takes a critical pragmatic approach (Jenlink, 2001, p. 5). A deeper understanding of each approach necessitates a unifier or scholar-practitioner, to bridge the elements of theory and practice in order to develop an intelligent and practical theory of educational leadership.

### **Modernity**

Modernism developed as a reaction to an economic crisis as identified “by such national reports as *A Nation at Risk*, *Action for Excellence*, *Making the Grade*, and *Academic Preparation for College*” (Johnston, 1994, p. 115). During the early 1980s, educational reformists, as well as policy makers, hurried to restructure schools in a way that responded to this crisis by emphasizing “academic standards, accountability, standardization, and leadership” (Johnston, 1994, p. 115). In this scheme, administrative personnel were empowered to assertively manage the organization in efforts to “achieve maximum efficiency and productivity” (McKinney & Garrison, 1994, p. 71). For the educational leader, on-the-job training became a dominating force over scholarly knowledge and theory.

Under modernistic influence or structuralism, education became subject to bureaucratic control whose aim was the creation “of schools that provide the skills necessary for increasing domestic productivity” (McKinney & Garrison, 1994, p. 71). This type of education was implemented with a strict adherence to instructions; it is policy driven, highly ordered, efficient, and marginalizing. “The logic of structuralism is grounded in the belief that individual human reasoning, conditioned by values, is fundamentally inconsistent with the idea of a rational self-regulating world. . . . Social order and symmetry are privileged over the desires of the individual” (Fazzaro, Walter, & McKerrow, 1994, p. 87). Within this framework, individuals became faceless people performing very specific tasks in order to keep the organizational machine called education functioning to maintain the status quo.

The effectiveness of this approach will positively differ depending on the perspective of the respondent. Bloom (1987), cited in Kaminsky (2000), offers a conservative perspective asserting that “public education contributes to a pervasive cultural illiteracy” (p. 201). A critical perspective might see public education as “responsible for moral unconsciousness that contributes to the continued exclusion, oppression, and subordination of those who are different” (Kaminsky, 2000, pp. 201–202). And there are those like Rorty (1989), as cited in Kaminsky (2000), who argue that contemporary education is not necessarily hopeless.

The graduates of the nation’s educational system are anything by immoralists. The schools have produced a generation of caring young men and women who have made it much more difficult to be brutal and spiteful to the poor, disoppressed, and different. (p. 204)

Moreover, "public schools and their administrators have established a long history of effective performance and public service that extends beyond objective measures of academic achievement alone" (Kaminsky, 2000, p. 205).

The measure of effectiveness of the modernistic approach to public education is difficult to judge considering all perspectives and its history. From any perspective, the notion largely goes unchallenged that schools are inundated with dilemmas and questions of social justice, social equity, ethics of care, and democratic practices. But the fact remains, administrative management as a structuralist approach "has survived and prospered as a practice in education" (Fazzaro et al., 1994, p. 91).

### *Postmodernity*

Fazzaro et al. (1994) admit to the success of modernism if only through its prolonged existence. However, decision maker's perspectives may be shifting. As societal and economic needs in America begin changing and new demands are placed on educators, postmodern theorists are hopeful to have an opportunity to rewrite inequitable traditional school practices. Giroux (1994) sees imminent change in the way we do school. He proclaims, "the signs pointing to dismantling of public education are everywhere" (p. 35). And according to Fazzaro et al. (1994), "the broader public has grown increasingly skeptical of the claims made by the proponents of technoscience knowledge. That technical judgment can actually improve education practice is now more widely doubted" (p. 91). Within the context of this discourse, technoscience can be understood to mean managerial or traditional approaches. Where modernism adopts a type of scientific approach, or technoscience, to address organizational structure and leadership practices, postmodernism dismisses science as a legitimate center of organizational structure and positions the educational leaders equal to community members by promoting emancipation for all those marginalized (Kaminsky, 2000; Ryan, 1998). From this perspective, leadership is essentially deconstructed from an authoritarian function to resemble a communal practice where everyone becomes a self-regulating individual.

Foster (1984) describes the replacement of technocratic models, as "incapable of dealing with the practical problems of human existence" (p. 244), with a critical theory model as a type of emancipation proclamation of economic, social, and political strongholds. This aspect of criticality is perhaps the most significant difference between managerial perspectives and "the notion of teachers and administrators as transformative intellectuals and engaged critics" (Giroux, 1994, p. 36). Postmodern approaches to leadership are, in a sense, revolutionary as compared to traditional administrative functions. Noteworthy is the fact that liberation by way of postmodern approaches is not without criticism. Critical analysis of democratic practice, equity, and justice are noble and necessary, but Kaminsky (2000) questions the practicality of this exercise in the school system. "On a practical level postmodernism seems committed to inaction, as a matter of principle" (Kaminsky,

2000, p. 212). Rephrasing a written commentary by Rosenau (1992) on the topic of postmodern theory–practice for school administration, Kaminsky (2000) states, “there is no justifiable path of action, although any of a myriad of alternative paths is equally acceptable” (p. 212). Furthermore, the postmodern failure to provide hard answers to problems facing practitioners, in effect, “paralyses decision-making and trivializes the idea of consistent practice” (Kaminsky, 2000, p. 214).

How effective is the postmodernist position on education and educational leadership as a reform initiative? It just depends. As a tool to address social equity, social justice, democratic practices, and an ethic of care, it might be said that it hits the mark (Ryan, 1998). Modernistic weaknesses become postmodernistic strengths. In this sense, “postmodern perspectives reflect a reconsideration of the role of research and inquiry in the knowledge–practice relationship” (Jenlink, 2001, p. 3). The applicability of postmodern “high theory” is an important question that should be addressed as well. Kaminsky (2000) reports problems with its concept of power, dismissal of science, nihilistic tendencies, excessive seriousness, and cultural usefulness. Framed in this manner, practicality becomes postmodernistic weaknesses and modernistic strengths.

### ***Critical Pragmatism***

With consideration of the strengths and weakness of modernism and postmodernism as an approach to develop effective educational reform initiatives, critical pragmatists approach their practice by drawing upon strengths from both. Where traditional practice offers an embedded organizational structure to build upon and practical knowledge of how to do schooling, this “new scholarship” or critical pragmatic approach “does not necessarily accept the status quo of social relations, but investigates the nature of established realities and educates actors about this relationship” (Foster, 1994, p. 41). This is something like thinking about how to go beyond an existing design, creating a product to address all stakeholders’ liberties, and implementing what is thought to be most accommodating. In this way, knowledge and practice are united to produce a new type of education reform focusing on the educational leader as a scholar–practitioner. Jenlink (2001) articulates the rationale for a “new scholarship” or the integration of scholarly knowledge with practical knowledge.

The ideal of scholar–practitioner leadership envisions a “new scholarship” wherein the practitioner as a scholar of practice, seeks to mediate professional practice and formal knowledge and theory through disciplined inquiry and practice to guide decisions on all levels of educational activity. (p. 7)

Jenlink (2001) further suggests that the more important task of the scholar–practitioner is to activate the traditional static leadership posture of educators so that leadership becomes a dynamic, “authentic position of value and utilization in the practice of teaching, learning, and leading” (p. 8).

Activation of a leadership stance that is static by the nature of modernism and is unmindful of issues dealing with social equity, social justice, and democratic practices, requires assistance from the postmodern approach. Postmodernism provides for the scholar–practitioner a rich understanding of criticality that can be applied to strengthen the relationship between theory and practice (Ryan, 1998). According to Jenlink (2001),

... the scholar–practitioner leader, as a criticalist, seeks to examine and explore, through social critique and scholarly inquiry, the social and cultural patterns of the educational system and community in which the system is situated. The scholar–practitioner leader, as criticalist, works to disallow the political issues of Whiteness that hold children, teachers, schools, and society hostage in a civilized system that all too often disregards diversity. Criticality shapes the leadership praxis, bringing into play a critical philosophical and theoretical lens, thus shaping the leader’s actions in the context of her or his practice. (p. 12)

Jenlink’s (2001) response represents an integration of postmodern theory and modern practice into a critical pragmatic approach referred to as “local theory.” To better appreciate “local theory” in this context, Larson (2000) offers the terms “practical scholarship, practical knowledge, situated knowledge, craft knowledge and tacit knowledge” (p. 309). It is the incorporation of practical knowledge or “local theory” that shapes scholarship into a suitable fit in the pragmatic scheme of education, thus defining the scholar–practitioner’s approach to practice. In an effort to conceptualize the scholar–practitioner, it is important to recognize that modernistic tendencies made way for the application of “local theory.”

Traditional reliance on practice as the guiding force shaping educational leadership fostered concerns with the emergence of postmodernistic “high theory” as an alternative approach to education. “High theory” in this respect is referring to what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) equate to as “knowledge-for-practice” developed as scholarly knowledge and research in relation to the profession. Lacking practical application in the field, this type of knowledge becomes problematic for educational practitioners. Not entirely without value, “knowledge-for-practice, representing a formal or codified knowledge base” can be modified to suit practical purposes (Jenlink, 2001, p. 10). If you add an element of critical reflection borrowed from knowledge-for-practice to the knowledge embedded in personal and social practice, the heaviness of “high theory” begins to lighten resulting in knowledge-in-practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, as cited in Jenlink, 2001). By including a broader scope to critical reflection, still a more useful alternative in the field of education takes form. What results is a knowledge-of-practice style, “represented by knowledge and theory acting as generative material for interpretation and examination of practice, as

well as knowledge constructed in local communities of inquiry” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, as cited in Jenlink, 2001, p. 10).

Diluting, not disregarding “high theory” or knowledge-*for*-practice in the end satisfies requirements of both modernistic and postmodernistic approaches. It addresses the criticality component so significant to postmodern philosophy and packages it in a form that is practical to use by modernistic standards. It is knowledge-*of*-practice or “local theory” that defines the scholar-practitioner, “wherein the leader as scholar and her/his practice are inseparable from scholarly and critically oriented inquiry” (Jenlink, 2001, p. 5).

## **Pattern**

Developing out of the etymological analysis of critical pragmatism as a theoretical foundation for scholar-practitioner leadership is “the understanding of the connecting patterns and relationships that undergird the lived world” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1999, p. 62). Post-formal thinking facilitates the recognition of interconnecting patterns within the scholar-practitioner construct by exploring both obvious and hidden orders of reality. The “explicate” order of reality describes “simple patterns” that can be “identified by the categorization and generalization function of formal thought” (Bohm & Peat, 1987, as cited in Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1999, p. 67). The “implicate” order of reality represents “a much deeper structure . . . in which ostensible separateness vanishes and all things seem to become part of a larger unified structure” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1999, p. 67). The pragmatic criticalist naturally employs this type of exploration of observable and hidden realities in order to give meaning to the scholar-practitioner construct.

### ***Explicate and Implicate Order of Reality***

Generalizing the intent and tendencies of modernistic and postmodernistic approaches to educational reform and leadership preparation makes space for a critical pragmatic approach. Traditional methods of schooling have been driven by societal demands to “link the needs of corporate America to the American public schools” (McKinney & Garrison, 1994, p. 71). The traditional or modernistic tendency surfaces as a “commitment within the academic community toward a positivistic ideology” (Maxcy, 1991b, p. 171). This type of initiative patterns itself using the machine metaphor; it is a highly structured, strictly managed, practically applied, hierarchical system of efficiency and productivity. Moreover, “common patterns and tendencies have cut across . . . democracy, the nation-state, science and ‘the scientific method,’ secularism, rationality as the method of thought, secularism, and humanism” (Cahoone, 1988, as cited in Maxcy, 1991c, p. 132). Recognizable movements include “principal academies, certification and licensure, testing of teachers, and other credentialing efforts seek to restrict the voice of those out of power” (Maxcy, 1991a, p. 52). The implicate reality of



modernity is that voices are silenced and people are controlled, manipulated, and reduced to laborer status. In contrast, the antimodernity movement or postmodernity's intent is to dismantle public schools in order to "achieve the goal of a fair, free, intellectually rich, and instrumentally powerful educational system" (Kaminsky, 2000, p. 203). Disenchanted by social injustice, social inequity, and undemocratic practice, postmodern efforts are focused on leveling the playing field by abandoning power relationships, dismissing science, and abolishing truth (Kaminsky, 2000). Reform initiatives taking "aim at maximizing the democratic dimension of schooling" include "vouchers, site-based management, teacher empowerment, and other efforts" (Maxcy, 1991a, p. 52). Though representing but a few examples of postmodernity's "high theory" or codified knowledge, these tendencies as a response to the inadequacies of traditional practice become "so relentlessly downbeat, gloomy, and pessimistic that it may be beyond use for administrative purposes" (Kaminsky, 2000, p. 210). Subsequently, space is found between conflicting approaches to education.

Critical pragmatists as scholar-practitioners fill this space. They do so by not ignoring controlled "scientific inquiry in the practice of their profession" and by not ignoring questions of justice, equity, and democracy in a scheme referred to as local theory" (Kaminsky, 2000, p. 214). As a result, "local theory" "portrays the discourse through which a citizen or citizens can engage in open reflection about the usefulness of various institutions for the purposes of a democratic society" (Kaminsky, 2000, p. 215). The implicate order of this reality reveals itself as research based learning communities where participants become resources of past knowledge and generators of new knowledge through open lines of communication (Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2001). Additionally, "concerned with growth and continuous self-renewal," the scholar-practitioner becomes a leader responsible for self learning and provides opportunities for community members to learn (p. 29). By effectively positioning "research in the concerns and experiences of practicing educators," the scholar-practitioner "will better serve and inform both research and practice" (Larson, 2000, p. 308). With a focus on the concepts of learning communities, transformative leadership, shared vision and values, and criticality, this initiative finds a fit within the "dynamic web of interconnected components" (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1999, p. 70). By meshing the strengths of two opposing perspectives, "local theory" used as a unitary element of practice and scholarship creates a "new scholarship" known as the scholar-practitioner.

## Process

The process of deconstruction described by Kincheloe and Steinberg (1999) involves exposing unintended or unstated meanings. Through the lens of criticality, both modernism and postmodernism hide meaning within the text of each approach. These silent meanings also make space for a critical pragmatic



approach to educational reform. Modernism's reliance on practical knowledge acquired on-the-job while disconnecting scholarly knowledge has shaped an ill-informed culture of educators (Larson, 2000). Larson describes the postmodernist reaction to this perspective by asserting that "academics are often frustrated by practitioners who reject talking about ideas unless they lead directly to 'what do I do on Monday'" (p. 311). In contrast, an academically informed culture of educators, also known as postmodernists, tend to rely heavily on scholarly knowledge while dismissing the value of practical knowledge. These educators have a vision without means of actualization according to modernists (Kaminsky, 2000).

Larson (2000) describes the critical local theorists' response to the call for relief on both sides of the spectrum "by intentionally including scholars and practitioners who think in different ways about problems of practice in our communities of inquiry" (p. 311). In this way, the scholar–practitioner leader advances the "capacity to create less rigid as well as more inclusive learning communities" (Larson, 2000, p. 311) where knowledge is shared and generated resulting in individual and organizational learning (Ubben et al., 2001). Furthermore, empowerment of school community members through this approach meets postmodern demands without dismantling the whole educational organization by "allowing others the freedom to risk and grow" (Ubben et al., 2001, p. 32). To explicate the fit of learning communities as a scholarly practice, research studies document the effects of participating educators as being energizing and renewing (Larson, 2000). Promoting empowerment and individual and organizational development, the educational leader as reformist can no longer separate scholarship and practice. Separated, scholarly knowledge and practical knowledge act as competing entities, but united as symbolized by the extended hyphen; the scholar–practitioner equates to leadership praxis.

## **Contextualization**

Through examination of the interconnectedness of scholarship and practice, the critical pragmatist emerges as a connector of opposite perspectives (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1999). What is important to the critical pragmatist as scholar–practitioner is not the dismantling of education, but rather the preservation of the democratic values it was founded upon. As an "intellectual leader," the scholar–practitioner is "driven by end-values" and "positive reformulation of ways of practice" (Foster, 1994, p. 45). At the same time, the "virtuous practitioner" seeks to elevate "followers' consciousness" as a fundamental purpose of scholar–practitioner leadership (Foster, 1994, p. 45). While realizing the need for managerial leadership, the scholar–practitioner as a "transformative agent" works to shift authoritative practices aside making way for "more vital aspects related to the nature of the school as a democratic community" (Foster, 1994, p. 47). By serving as an intellectual leader, virtuous practitioner, and agent of transformation,

the scholar–practitioner becomes a model of a reconceptualized vision of what an educational leader ought to be (Foster, 1994).

## Conclusion

In the field of two very different and competing educational reform perspectives, a “new scholarship” is born. The emergence of critical pragmatism as a philosophical and theoretical foundation from which the leadership perspective of scholar–practitioner originated can be traced using post-formal thinking. Kincheloe and Steinberg (1999) provide a framework to conceptualize the time and space the scholar–practitioner occupies by examining the etymology, pattern, process, and context from which it developed. By applying the tenets of post-formal thought, an interconnected web of histories, meanings, patterns, processes, and contexts envelope modernity and postmodernity, situating critical pragmatism at the center of reform.

Modernists stick to the traditional methods of schooling. High productivity and efficiency claim the prize, though falling short on understanding the impact of the methodology employed. Postmodernists abandon the script altogether in order to rewrite it. Consciousness and criticality offer a vision of the prize, though falling short of understanding how to get there. The critical pragmatic approach carefully follows the script maintaining its authenticity while methodically transforming it for the sake of continual improvement. As inseparable entities, scholarship and practice unite productivity, consciousness, efficiency, and criticality, thus turning a vision into reality. In this way, the extended hyphen marrying scholarship and practice serves as the most significant descriptor of the scholar–practitioner’s leadership praxis. The scholar–practitioner approaches his or her practice through the lens of criticality, ever conscious of the consequences of actions, actively working within and outside of the organizational framework to affect change. Social justice, social equity, democracy, and an ethic of care guide decision making and practice (Jenlink, 2001). The scholar–practitioner is a “leader-manager;” one who “manages with a leadership perspective” (Ubben et al., 2001, p. 13). Working as a change agent, this leader seeks to correct past wrongs, empowering all to reach greater values and awareness.

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